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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the experiences of an 11-year veteran learning disabilities (LD) teacher during her twelfth year of teaching when three severely learning disabled adolescent boys changed from grumbling basal reader users to active, involved readers of quality literature. The article focuses on activities to improve reading fluency and track miscues through the use of novels chosen to engage the students' interest and to inspire them to actually want to read. The article notes that the other LD teacher at the school, a veteran basal reader user, began using novels 4 months year of teaching when 3 severely learning disabled adolescent boys changed from after they were first introduced to the LD students. It also notes that her three "problem" students were the first LD students at that school to complete the high school English requirements in a regular classroom setting and that they acted as advocates of reading for other LD students entering the program. (RS)

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by

Lynne Chalmers

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Going Out on a Limb: Teaching Adolescent Boys to be Readers

By Lynne Chalmers
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

As I look back on 15 years of teaching, I remember year number 12 as being the time of greatest change in my teaching and in the success of my students. I had been using novels to teach reading to my learning disabled students for several years, but not to the extent that I began to that year.

With 11 years of teaching experience behind me, I accepted a job as a special education teacher of students with learning disabilities (LD) in a different school district. Even though I was an eleven-year veteran LD teacher, the butterflies flitted furiously the first day of school. My greatest challenge, I had been warned previously, would be three boys, two in grade eight and one in grade seven, with severe learning disabilities in both reading and writing. All three came to the learning disabilities (LD) resource room three hours of the school day for their classes in English and social studies, as well as during their study hall period.

The LD resource program was composed of two classrooms, across the hall from each other, with one LD teacher in each room. The "across the hall" LD teacher had been teaching in the current program for eight years. My predecessor had been teaching in the program for ten years. What I found was a well-entrenched curriculum for reading that revolved around basal readers. My three boys were to start their English class that year in the fifth grade basal reader. They had worked in the fifth grade basal the entire past school year, but had not yet passed the "end of the level" test.

Not wanting to "rock the boat" my first day, I gritted my teeth and told myself I would give the basal reader approach my best shot. I knew from my previous experience with basal readers, especially their usage with adolescent boys, that they were ineffective in improving reading skills and certainly a hindrance to students' love of or enthusiasm for reading. I found that my determination to "go with the flow" was not strong enough to overcome the frustration I felt with using basal readers with my three boys. Getting them to read each day was extremely difficult as they found every excuse in the book to avoid doing so. Their comments of, "Why do we have to do this? We can't read anyway," "I hate reading," and "This really sucks" led me to take drastic measures.

The third Monday morning the boys came in as usual, right before the bell rang, and slowly proceeded to take the basal readers off the shelf. As I asked them to leave the basal readers where they were because we would not be using them today, they turned and looked at me suspiciously. I proceeded to explain that we would not be using the basal readers any longer and that in their place we would be reading a novel. Chris, the older of the two eighth grade boys, immediately wanted to know if I was "for real" and Travis, the other eighth grade boy, wanted to know just exactly what kind of a teacher I was. The seventh grader, Dana, was concerned that this may get him into trouble and wanted to be sure that I had okayed this with someone "in power" (i.e., the principal or special services coordinator). He wondered

how they would ever pass all the "end of the level" tests he knew were necessary before they could graduate from high school.

I tried to assure Dana that everything would work out fine and he need not be worried, knowing I had not cleared such a drastic change with anyone. I proceeded to hand out the paperback novel that we would be reading, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck. The boys' reaction to the book was interesting. Instead of the expected, "What a dumb looking book," and "I ain't gonna read this," I heard nothing. There was total silence as the three of them turned the books over and over and looked through the pages. Handling the books as though they were made of fine china, they looked them over slowly and carefully.

After letting them do so for several minutes, I plunged into the story setting describing Rob and his Shaker family. I proceeded to read the first chapter aloud, and after three pages had the boys take turns with me. Their quietness slowly dissipated as they began to laugh at Rob's exploits, and soon they were asking questions about Rob's dialect and way of life. Travis, who lived on a farm, was soon explaining to Chris and Dana the process of the birthing of a calf, since he had experienced it several times before. I sat back and watched as these three boys who hated to read discussed the first chapter of *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. On subsequent days, instead of grumbling about having to read out of their basal readers, the three of them fought over who would get to read first.

I had previously developed study guides for *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, as well as several other novels. These we used as the basis for discussion or comprehension checks. I also found that going over the discussion questions before reading the chapters increased the boys' comprehension, for now they had a "purpose" for reading. They needed to find the answers to the questions.

We had been doing one minute timed readings out of the basal readers to improve reading fluency three days a week. The boys would graph the number of words they read each time along with the number of miscues they made. I kept track of the miscues they made while reading and they counted the number of words read. Continuing the timed readings in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, an amazing thing occurred. Each of the boys increased the number of words read in a minute by at least 25 words: Travis increased from 80 to 112, Chris increased from 73 to 97, and Dana increased from 95 to 120 words. The number of miscues decreased. They had been making an average of five to eight miscues a minute in the basal readers, and decreased this to two to three miscues when doing timed readings in the novel. So much for the skeptics who would say that the novel would be much more difficult reading than the controlled basal reader. The interest and motivation of the boys obviously outweighed the effects of the more difficult vocabulary.

At the conclusion of *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, the boys asked if they could read another novel. By this time, the other LD teacher and special services coordinator had heard that I had deviated from the existing curriculum. The enthusiasm of the boys and the data that demonstrated their gains in comprehension and fluency convinced them that maybe what I was doing wasn't such a bad idea, and that it was permissible for the boys not to take the "end of the level" tests. I continued with the reading program based on novels for the rest of the school year. The other LD teacher began using novels four months after I had begun using them, because of the success of my students, and the begging of her students. The basal readers were put in storage, never to be exhumed again.

We continued through the rest of the year reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, and *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. The boys grew as readers, as I did as a teacher. I found I could go beyond the oral discussions, the study guides, and the timed readings. I came to this realization the day Travis asked me if I thought it would be a good idea for him to do his written

report for social studies on the Ozark Mountains, the place Billy and his dogs grew up in *Where the Red Fern Grows.* Needless to say, it was the best report Travis had ever written. Writing the report was meaningful to him, because of what he had experienced in reading *Where the Red Fern Grows.* He used some of the information in the novel in his report, as well as information from other sources he found in the library.

I realized that I could not only improve these students' reading skills, but that I could also, through the use of the novels, improve their writing skills. I began to develop writing exercises around the novels which, amazingly, the boys did not complain about. The improvement in their expressive writing skills was evident from the beginning. They wrote longer compositions and used more of a variety of vocabulary. Some of the pieces they wrote included character sketches where they could choose the character they wanted to write about, making predictions about what would happen next, newspaper articles about what had happened, and rewrites of the ending of the book.

One of the most exciting moments for me was when I showed the movie, *Where the Red Fern Grows,* after we had completed the novel. The boys' reaction was wonderful feedback for me as they commented, "The book was better," "How come they left out so much?," and "I pictured it differently." What an opportunity for us to discuss the value of a book and the fun of creating your own images. These were boys who had previously thought you could always see the movie so why read the book.

In the year that followed, we continued the reading of novels (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Grapes of Wrath, The Pearl, Mountain Man,* and *The Chocolate War*), totally structuring the special education English program around them. More and more I felt these students had a right to read the literary works that they had previously been isolated from. Others felt that such books were too difficult for learning disabled students to read. I could now prove that was not true. Not only could these students read these novels, but they could comprehend them at a level they had never reached with basal readers. The move these students made from literal comprehension of what they read to higher level comprehension was evident. They became adept at making predictions, inferences, and critical evaluations, and continually questioned what they had read.

By the end of my second year working with Travis, Chris, and Dana, I was able to place all three of them into the regular English class. They successfully completed the high school English requirements in the regular classroom setting which was a first for LD students who had previously been in the LD English class.

I will never forget moments such as the time Travis' mother called me to ask what had happened at school. Travis had actually gone to the public library and checked out a book and was reading it at home. He had never read anything at home before, and she was amazed and excited to see him reading. Travis continued to check books out of the library until he read all of the S. E. Hinton books. He then moved on to other authors. Another unforgettable moment was when Dana asked me for the names of some other good books like *Where the Red Fern Grows.* He went on to read *The Incredible Journey, Sounder*, and many others for outside reading for his regular English class.

Amazingly, these three boys became the advocates for my English program as I began to use it with other learning disabled students entering my program for the first time. In response to the new students' comments of "Yuck, I'm not reading that," and "This looks like a dumb book," Travis, Chris, or Dana would respond with what a great book it was and how much they enjoyed it, and would proceed to tell parts of the book. I found I had to cut them off before they told the entire story. The three of them would then engage in a discussion of "Remember when . . . That was great."

The transformation of these disabled readers was something I will never forget. To see them pick up a book and begin to read it, because they wanted to, and not because they had to, was one of those perks that reminded me why I loved teaching.

Lynne Chalmers is currently an assistant professor of special education at the University of North Dakota. Prior to coming to UND, she taught secondary students with learning and behavior problems for fifteen years.

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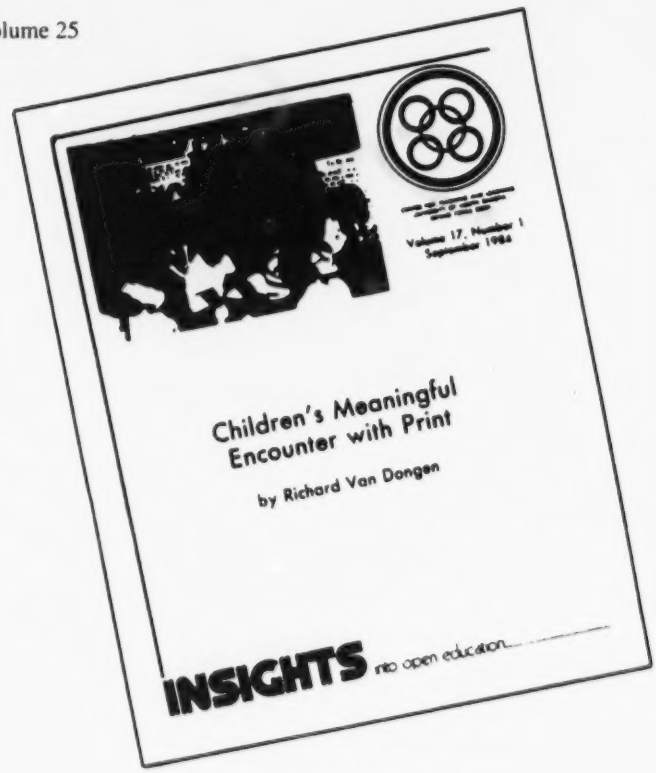

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